

18 April 1973

NSA Declassification/Release Instructions on File.

INTELLIGENCE MEMORANDUM

Hanoi and Sihanouk: The Emerging Communist Game Plan in Cambodia

Key Judgments

--Hanoi's strategy has been a major unknown in the Cambodian equation. But the North Vietnamese have at last decided to back Sihanouk fully and publicly emphasize a hard-line stand on a settlement. These decisions appear to have been prompted by an optimistic reading of the current Cambodian situation and by a belief that if the Communists press ahead, they stand a good chance of forcing a settlement largely on their own terms.

--The conflict, therefore, may be entering a new and crucial period. The Communists have embarked on a major propaganda campaign emphasizing that the Khmer Communists and Sihanouk represent the real Cambodian government. They are preparing to punctuate this line by staging another round of guerrilla attacks within Phnom Penh itself. The Communists may also be preparing to surface any US POWs they hold in Cambodia in an effort to force the US to end its military support for the government and agree to Communist terms.

--How well Phnom Penh copes with this array of military, political and psychological pressure will depend largely on the success of current efforts to broaden and strengthen the Lon Nol regime. If the government can hold out until summer, when heavy rains should slacken insurgent military pressure, its chances of getting through 1973, still on the defensive but intact, are good.

--If Hanoi sees Phnom Penh holding its own or gaining strength and stability, it can adjust its game plan by arranging for the Khmer Communists to negotiate with the government or by opting for protracted struggle. But for the next two to three months the Communists will probably consider that they have much to gain and relatively little to lose by keeping the pressure on.

Hanoi's Decision

What Hanoi would like to see in Cambodia has always been reasonably clear--a coalition government heavily influenced if not directly controlled by its Communist faction. This government would terminate the political and military alliance with the US, publicly repudiate any US right to fly combat missions over Cambodian territory, and, turn a blind eye to the Vietnamese Communists' unhampered use of Cambodian territory, perhaps including the port facilities at Kompong Som.

Although these objectives are firmly in mind, Hanoi has been less sure of how best to achieve them. Beyond some muted and infrequent endorsements of Communist demands for an ouster of the present regime, Hanoi had never put forward any particular Communist lineup of personalities or a fully shaped negotiating strategy. In fact, up to now, Hanoi's strategy has been a major unknown in the Cambodian equation. But it now appears that the North Vietnamese decided early this year on exactly how to fit Sihanouk into their strategy. The latest manifestations of that new game plan are Sihanouk's recent visit to Cambodia and Hanoi's effusive support for the Prince as Cambodia's "legitimate chief of state."

Prior to Sihanouk's ouster in 1970, Hanoi had gone through many difficult times with the Prince in attempting to secure the use of Cambodian territory to support its war effort in South Vietnam. Sihanouk had always been a bit too independent and hard to handle for Hanoi's tastes. Moreover, Hanoi is apprehensive about Chinese ambitions for an important political role for Sihanouk following a settlement in Cambodia--a stronger role than Hanoi would prefer and one which would increase Chinese leverage in Phnom Penh at North Vietnamese expense. The establishment of Sihanouk's exile "government" in Peking did nothing to diminish North Vietnamese suspicions. Strong and consistent Chinese support for Sihanouk over the past three years has only increased Hanoi's misgivings about collaboration with the Prince.

Hanoi apparently temporized on Sihanouk until the Prince's visit to Hanoi in late January. At that time Sihanouk publicly suggested that he was going to Hanoi armed with Chinese advice that the insurgency close ranks, especially in view of Phnom Penh's offer of a unilateral cease-fire. The communique issued in Hanoi following that visit was relatively non-committal, but in retrospect Sihanouk's conversations with the North Vietnamese appear to have been productive. Hanoi, shortly thereafter, must have begun making the necessary arrangements for Sihanouk's trip to the "liberated zone" and the subsequent display of instant insurgent unity.

Chinese prodding and Sihanouk's apparent willingness to agree to a circumscribed, if not expendable, role no doubt encouraged Hanoi to embrace the Prince. But the catalytic factor may have been Hanoi's own optimistic assessment of the situation in Cambodia. The North Vietnamese probably came to see events in Cambodia as developing in their favor far more rapidly than they had anticipated. The North Vietnamese have had reason to be encouraged by the government's dismal military performance over the past three months and by the Khmer Communists' improving capabilities and increasing victories. Hanoi also probably came to the same conclusion most outside observers reached--that internal political collapse in Phnom Penh was becoming a distinct possibility.

The image of political disunity within insurgent ranks and Hanoi's non-committal posture on the Sihanouk issue, however, were doing little to help along the process of deterioration in Phnom Penh. Hanoi apparently came to a decision that a timely and all-out propaganda and political offensive, together with continuing military pressure, might be enough to collapse the Lon Nol regime and force negotiations on Communist terms. For Hanoi, this meant swallowing its own objections to Sihanouk and cracking a few heads together within the insurgency.

There is little reason to believe that the Sihanouk problem has been permanently resolved. Are

the Communists prepared to deal him off in subsequent negotiations with a government in Phnom Penh? Hanoi and the Khmer Communists would probably be glad to; Peking and Sihanouk's relatively small number of supporters in the insurgency would be less willing. If he is not expendable, exactly what kind of role do the Communists foresee for Sihanouk? Since returning from the "liberated zone," Sihanouk has been careful to stress that the Khmer Communists would play a more important role than he in a new Cambodian government. In his most recent statement, issued from Pyongyang, Sihanouk pointed to the three in-country insurgent leaders, Khieu Samphan, Hu Min, and Hou Youn, as the "inevitable leaders of Cambodia." But the Communists may fear that the irrepressible and politically astute Sihanouk would come to dominate any coalition government regardless of prior commitments. As a result, Sihanouk's precise position in an eventual Cambodian settlement is sure to be an issue requiring additional pulling and hauling between Hanoi, Peking and the Khmer insurgency.

The Game Plan

An assessment of the motivation and timing behind Hanoi's decision on Sihanouk must be largely speculative. But the general outlines of North Vietnamese strategy now unfolding seem fairly clear. For the time being, the North Vietnamese are saying that a settlement must come on Communist terms, i.e., the ouster of Lon Nol and negotiations between a successor regime in Phnom Penh and an insurgent "government" headed by Sihanouk. The Communists are now embarked on a major propaganda campaign aimed at creating the impression that the Lon Nol government is a US enclave living on borrowed time. By contrast, the insurgents are pictured as a fully unified and independent political and military force that constitutes the real Cambodian government and governs the bulk of Cambodian population and territory. A next logical step in this campaign could be the installation of Sihanouk and his Peking-based government in insurgent-controlled Cambodian territory. But an in-country "government" is only a possibility--not a likelihood. The PRG's failure

to establish a permanent base in South Vietnam suggests that Hanoi approaches such a tactic with extreme caution. On balance, it seems more likely that Hanoi believes Sihanouk can achieve more for their cause through his propaganda activities on the international plane.

Any Communist political moves will, of course, only be orchestration for continuing military action against the government. Intercepted messages indicate that the Communists are determined to maintain and tighten their vise on Phnom Penh's lines of communication. These messages also reveal that the Communists are preparing to take the war to the capital itself through a campaign of sapper attacks and sabotage. Hit-and-run guerrilla "spectaculars" could be psychologically damaging to the government--especially at a time when it is recovering from a major political crisis and when public support appears at a new low. By extending their operations to the capital, the Communists probably hope, at a minimum, to further lessen public confidence in the regime. They may believe that a high level of terrorism and sabotage in the city could provoke a new political crisis that would overturn the government.

It is just possible that the Communists may also now be thinking of bringing the war home to the United States by playing on the prisoner of war issue. In remarks that may have been designed to reach Western ears, the PRG press spokesman in Paris recently commented that the Khmer Communists are holding some American military personnel. (The Department of Defense currently lists 22 US servicemen as MIA in Cambodia. This, however, is the only indication from a Communist official or from any other source that some may be prisoners of war.) The Communists are obviously hopeful that congressional and other public opposition to US military activity in Cambodia will eventually move the US to abandon Phnom Penh and seek negotiations on Communist terms. If they do hold US prisoners, the Communists can be expected to exploit them at some point in an effort to influence US public opinion against American involvement in Cambodia.

By all indications the conflict in Cambodia is entering a new and crucial phase. During the next few

months, the Lon Nol government will have to cope not only with mounting military pressure, but also with a well-orchestrated Communist campaign of political and psychological warfare. How well the government can cope will depend in part on the effectiveness of President Lon Nol's current efforts to broaden the government and revitalize the army. This will also strongly influence Hanoi's view of its future prospects in Cambodia; but in any case the Communists are not likely to abandon their current strategy hastily. Hanoi is probably operating with one eye on the calendar in a belief that Phnom Penh's collapse, if it occurs at all, must come before mid-summer when heavy rains will make insurgent military operations much more difficult. If the government can hold together until the rains--and especially if political and military reforms begin to take hold--it should be able to get through 1973, perhaps very much on the defensive, but still intact.

If after a few months Hanoi judges that its hard-line high-pressure strategy is not working--that Phnom Penh is holding its own or gaining strength--it can adjust its game plan accordingly. The Communists can begin to explore the possibilities and prospects of negotiating with the existing government or they can make a decision to avoid the conference table and opt for protracted struggle. Aside from the strength of the opposition, their decision will hinge heavily on the amount of big power interest in arranging a compromise settlement. But for the next two to three months Hanoi probably considers that it has much to gain and relatively little to lose by subjecting Phnom Penh's political and military stability to an exacting test.